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Author(s): Elizabeth Livermore Forbes

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DRAMATIC LUSTRUM

A STUDY OF THE EFFECT OF HENRY JAMES'S THEATRICAL EXPERIENCE ON HIS LATER NOVELS

ELIZABETH LIVERMORE FORBES

I

SELDOM has an artist given to a medium not his own the devotion that Henry James gave to the drama, as one result of which he quite forsook the practice of the novel for six years, 1889–1896. This period of his career has been generally dismissed by critics as either unimportant, sterile, or disastrous. That it was none of these, but on the contrary, of great value, it is the purpose of this study to show.

What led James to espouse the drama in such a whole-souled way? First of all, the fact that from earliest childhood he had been interested in plays and was taken constantly to the theatre, both here and abroad. He wrote his first short plays as a small boy, and the desire to be a dramatist is a motif that recurs throughout his life. The second fact that influenced him was the renaissance of dramatic activity in London in the 1890's, in the course of which theatre managers solicited nearly every leading novelist for plays. The reason which James himself repeatedly adduced in his letters for giving up the novel for the theatre was the small stir made by his novels, and the hope of winning fame and money in some other way—"I remain irremediably unpublished." These causes, his lifelong interest in the theatre, the dramatic renaissance of the nineties, and his yearning for success, doubtless got him started; but once started he became fascinated by the artistic and technical problems of this "most unholy trade," and worked very hard at his plays and at the study of dramatic theory. Only after the *Guy Domville* debacle could he bear to give

up the drama and return, enriched by his experience, to his earlier medium.

It is significant that the novel which immediately preceded his play *The American* should have been *The Tragic Muse*, the embodiment of all his theatrical observations thus far—his love of the Comédie Française, his despair at the state of the English theatre, his appreciation of the artist's peculiar problems in the conflict with society. The book is really a clarification of James's ideas on what was to be for the next few years his main interest. If this makes it less good as a novel, it has nevertheless its importance as a sort of anticipatory apologia. It is the story of two artists and their struggles with an unsympathetic world. Nick Dormer and Miriam Rooth represent the author's aspirations and his fear of failure, and most of the other characters are vehicles for his ideas on the problems of the artist. Unity of plot is conspicuously absent for the last time in James's work. Gabriel Nash, incarnation of the aesthetic nineties, expresses many of James's own views on the difficulty of the craft of play-writing: ". . . a character in a play—. . . I speak more particularly of modern pieces—is such a wretchedly small peg to hang anything on! The dramatist shows us so little, is so hampered by his audience, is restricted to so poor an analysis." Miriam's creator puts prophetic words into her mouth when she speaks of success: "Surely it's vulgar to think only of the noise one's going to make—especially when one remembers how utterly *bêtes* most of the people will be among whom one makes it. It isn't to my possible glories I cling; it's simply to my idea, even if it's destined to sink me." Nick, the painter, formulates a creed which is more truly James's than the alleged desire for money and renown: "To do the most when there would be the least to be got by it was to be most in the spirit of high production." Here is that "artistic rage" which so utterly possessed the novelist.

The American was the first of James's plays to be produced, and since it ran for nearly two months, was the most success-

ful. It had, however, a warmer reception in the provinces than in London. The reviews generally agreed that the first two acts, being light drawing-room comedy, are better than the last two, which are lurid melodrama. The dialogue is called prolix and the action too slow, and the use of the dusty devices of monologue and aside is criticized. But a comparison of the play with the novel shows that in spite of these adverse criticisms the exigencies of the dramatic form had already taught him something. The play has a higher unity than the book, but lacks its subtlety. No wonder James wrote, "The question comes up of the amount of interpretation a piece may depend on receiving, a question the answer to which can hardly fail to regulate the experiment from the germ."¹ What actor in the world could go through "that odd dim form of a smile that affected his guest as the scraping of a match that doesn't light"? or of what actress could it be said, "the eyes were like two rainy autumn moons and the touch portentously lifeless"?

Within a month of the provincial production of *The American* James was at one moment calling it his "tribute to the vulgarest of the muses," and at another writing, "I feel at last as if I had found my *real* form," from which he had been kept away before "by a half-modest, half-exaggerated sense of the difficulty (that is, I mean, the practical odiousness) of the conditions."²

Evidently undiscouraged by his comparative lack of success, and fascinated by the difficulty of the form, he thought of little but the theatre for the next few years. His essay on Ibsen, as well as the introductory note to *Theatricals, Second Series*, shows his keen interest in the theory of drama. "A play is above everything a work of selection, and Ibsen, with his curious and beautiful passion for the unity of time . . . condemns himself to admirable rigors." Selection in play-writing was something James never really mastered, but his study bore

¹ Introductory note to *Theatricals, Second Series* (New York, 1895), viii-ix.

² *The Letters of Henry James*, Percy Lubbock, editor (London, 1920), I, 136.

fruit in his later novels. What he could not successfully do himself he appreciated in Ibsen. "The opportunity that he gives them [the actors] is almost always to do the deep and delicate thing. . . . He asks them to paint with a fine brush, for the subject that he gives them is ever our plastic humanity." The four plays in *Theatricals*, though they have been considered adequate in point of construction, and though one, *The Reprobate*, has been approved by Bernard Shaw, in the writer's opinion exemplify nearly all the errors and live up to few of the standards implied in James's critical works. The dialogue alone has to a certain extent the authentic flavor, though there are too many asides. The characters are two-dimensional and apt to be characterized by a tag, such as Miss Dyer's "I'm not quite sure you ought," a device which he elsewhere decries. The situations are much like those in his novels, but he seems unable to get below the surface, to do the "deep and delicate." Entrances and exits are badly managed; there are too many characters who do not determine incident, and too many incidents not illustrative of character. The plays, in short, merit the criticisms usually levelled by his detractors at his novels.

But the "passionate economy" of the play fascinated him. As he later wrote, "The novel, as largely practised in English, is the perfect paradise of the loose end. The play consents to the logic of but one way."³ In letters and elsewhere he advertises constantly to the agonizing selection enforced by lack of time:

The scientific name of this ferocious salvage is selection—selection made perfect, so that effect, the final residuum, shall become intense—intense with that sole intensity which the theatre can produce. . . . There is no room in a play for the play itself until everything (including the play, the distracted neophyte pantingly ascertains) has been completely eliminated.⁴

In 1893 he wrote to his brother, "I mean to wage this war

³ Preface to *The Awkward Age* (New York, 1919), xx.

⁴ Introductory note to *Theatricals, Second Series*.

ferociously for one year more—1894—and then [unless there is victory] . . . to 'chuck' the whole intolerable experiment and return to more elevated and more independent courses."

Guy Domville, produced in 1895, was the final effort of his first dramatic period. The critics for the most part agreed that Act I was good; that Act II was "incomprehensibly weak, entirely upset as it is by the introduction of new characters, a plot in the worst style of the French theatre,"⁵ in which the senseless drunken scene made for fuss rather than drama; that Act III would never win the public.⁶ James himself was overcome by the brutality of a public that could so misunderstand what he considered the best thing he had ever done. That he should have thought it his best work is significant in view of the subject matter of his three greatest novels. Guy Domville gives up the world and his ties with family and society, because he has found society rotten. In Act III he states that for him life is evil, because it is rooted in the sacrifice of others. It is this very contrast between two points of view on life, between two social and moral traditions, that we find treated, in different ways, in *The Ambassadors*, *The Wings of the Dove*, and *The Golden Bowl*. Renunciation, in one form or another, is their subject as it is that of *Guy Domville*. And renunciation was their creator's part when he wrote, "It has been a great relief to feel that one of the most detestable incidents of my life has closed. It has left me with an unutterable horror of the theatre—as well as with a blank uncertainty as to what that horror . . . will lead me to do in regard to the same."⁷ What that horror led him to do was to return, incomparably better equipped, to the novel.

II

Up till now, James had been experimenting with the novel

⁵ Criticisms, quoted from Leon Edel, *Henry James, Les Années Dramatiques* (Paris, 1931), 142.

⁶ G. B. Shaw, *Saturday Review*, January 12, 1895.

⁷ Quoted in Elizabeth Robins, *Theatre and Friendship* (London, 1932), 170f.

and the drama as separate crafts. The development of his work after the dramatic years shows how he exploited the possibilities of each to the enhancement of the other. It is obvious that the dramatic method is more direct, more intense, than that of the novel, and at the same time more limited with respect to what James customarily calls the pictorial element. His earlier novels are largely pictorial; the first one after the plays is entirely scenic, and in the last three we see the perfect fusion of picture and scene. The amazing thing is that his material is so tenuous as to be no very promising subject for either drama or narrative. Nevertheless, he has succeeded in marrying the intensity and directness of the drama to the breadth of vision and depth of implication of the novel.

Regarding his own achievement, James wrote,

I have worked like a horse—far harder than any one will ever know—over the whole stiff mystery of “technique”—I have run it to earth, and I don’t in the least hesitate to say that, for the comparatively poor and meagre, the piteously simplified, purposes of the English stage, I have made it absolutely my own, put it into my pocket.⁸

The obvious first result of all this hard work was *The Awkward Age*. It is conceived in ten books or “aspects,” corresponding to the scenes of a play, and carried out almost entirely in dialogue, except for the short passages introducing each book, which might be called metaphysical stage directions.⁹ James found a “coercive charm” in sacrificing the novelist’s prerogative of going behind his characters, in keep-

⁸ *Letters of Henry James*, I, 234.

⁹ As an example, what James would, in a play, have rendered simply as *struck*—a word he frequently used in *Theatricals* (equivalent to the French *frappé*)—appears here “It was one of those looks—not so frequent, it must be admitted, as the Muse of history, dealing at best in short cuts, is often by the conditions of her trade reduced to representing them—which after they have come and gone are felt not only to have changed relations but absolutely to have cleared the air.”

ing his book rigorously objective. There is pathos in his stating that in achieving his design he had "an envious glimpse of that artistic rage and that artistic felicity which I have ever supposed to be intensest and highest, the confidence of the dramatist strong in the sense of his postulate."

He does absolutely succeed in his purpose. The only question is whether his purpose is not too rigorous. A play in which only highlights are given, and the entire background in which the actors have their being is dark, leaves (at least in the hands of anyone but James) too much to implication and inference, and for this very reason does not act well. The book is, however, a beautifully constructed unity, and the dialogue does reveal character without retarding the action.¹⁰ His touch in comedy has become much lighter, and we feel that the end, when Nanda says to Vanderbank of her mother, "When I think of her downstairs there so often nowadays practically alone I feel as if I could scarcely bear it. She's so fearfully young," really constitutes a comic reversal in the Meredithian sense. *The Awkward Age* was in many ways the best book he had so far written, as he himself thought.¹¹

His novels after this period are distinguished by better characterization and fewer irrelevant characters, by fewer narrative and descriptive passages as such, by tighter construction, and by the greatest economy of action. He abandons the melodrama of *The American* for the drama of the mind, the loose narrative form of *The Portrait of a Lady* gives way to conceptions more architectural, the multiplied centres of interest in *The Tragic Muse* are reduced for the sake of unity, and the abundance of external action characteristic of his earlier works is cut down for the sake of greater intensity.

¹⁰ In a review of Swinburne's *Chastelard* (*Nation*, 1866) he had stated, "A dramatic work without design is a monstrosity . . . the radical weakness of *Chastelard* [is] that it has no backbone . . . Let him deal out poetry by the handful. . . . But meanwhile let not the play languish, let not the story halt." After more than thirty years he matched his own standard. Quoted from *Notes and Reviews*, Pierre de Chaignon la Rose, editor (Cambridge, 1921), 135 ff.

¹¹ A remark made to F. J. Stimson, of Dedham, in 1901.

All these points are illustrated in his three greatest novels.

The Ambassadors, published in 1903, is, to borrow an architectural term, the most centrally composed of all his books. The germ of the story is Strether's outburst in Gloriani's garden to little Bilham: "Live all you can; it's a mistake not to . . . one has the illusion of freedom; therefore don't be, like me, without the memory of that illusion." The whole book literally and beautifully germinates from these words in a way which James had not hitherto achieved. In 1884 James had written that the first quality of a fiction-writer was "a capacity for receiving straight impressions"; nearly twenty years later, with his dramatic experience well assimilated, he realized that equally important is the capacity for giving straight impressions. This he does by indirection. That is, instead of telling us in his own person, as he does in *The Portrait*, about Strether's life and character, he makes use of a device borrowed from the French, the *ficelle*, or confidante. The use made of Miss Gostrey, in revealing Strether's character and in helping us to understand his change of heart, is far more integral to the action than such an earlier example as Henrietta Stackpole. The device reaches its highest development in *The Golden Bowl*, where Mrs. Assingham, the *ficelle*, has engineered the marriage between Charlotte Stant and Mr. Verver, the cause of the whole situation.

The shifting of the stage from the outside world to the mind is clear if one compares Strether with his prototype, Newman. There is much more definite description of the external circumstances of Newman's life—we have a sharp picture of the Paris he moves in, of the people he meets, even of his own appearance. Strether is never described, but we know exactly what he is like when Miss Gostrey says to him, "You're doing something that you think not right," to which he replies, "Am I enjoying it as much as that?" When he goes to Mme de Vionnet's apartment, the detailed descriptions of objects are gone, and in their place is left a most subtle impression whose effect lasts long after the sharp edges of the other have faded. Scenery

as such in his later books has practically been eliminated, or exists only as an impressionistic background to reënforce the mood.

The dramatic structure is as compact and orderly as that of *The Awkward Age*. The scenes in which we are admitted to Strether's mind alternate with those spoken scenes with his various confidantes by means of which the development is consolidated and made intelligible. There is less dialogue, but it is less necessary, for we are not merely watching people's behavior, from which we must divine what they are thinking; we are watching the processes of thought themselves dramatized. By abandoning a method too rigorous, James has arrived at an even more dramatic result.

The Wings of the Dove exemplifies some of the fallacies of James's dramatic theory, as he himself realized when he called it "the most striking example of my regular failure to keep the appointed halves of my whole equal." But in the sense of Greek tragedy, that it is "the portrayal of a catastrophe determined in spite of oppositions," it is the best of his books. Milly's gallant spirit is itself the opposition to the catastrophe, and this, having been determined from the start, is an excellent example of the economy of action which is one of the striking differences between such a work as *The Portrait* and the later novels. He builds up his climax by a slow succession of scenes in which very little happens. This would be impossible on the stage, yet he owes his use of the technique to the stage, for he employs it in cases where in the earlier books he simply narrates what happens. The whole picture or scene suddenly becomes complete with the fitting in of a last bit of action or suggested action which is superficially no more important than the rest but which with dramatic rightness gives all the pieces their true significance as parts of a whole. But he has pursued "that magnificent and masterly indirectness which means the *only* dramatic straightness and intensity" to what may be called the point of diminishing returns. In his eagerness to have the characters reveal themselves and

to have the consequences of action explain action, he has left out what should have been the great scene of the book—Densher's last interview with Milly. The consequence of the action here is that he and Kate realize that their marriage has become more impossible than ever, and there we are, as James would say, back at the beginning. But it is not enough, and this is one of the few occasions on which he merits the accusation of bloodlessness. That such an accusation is possible, however, only proves how much he had learned since the days when he was criticized for being too luridly melodramatic.

The later novels are quite as long as the earlier ones, yet a great deal less actually happens. This is owing partly to the famous verbosity of James's later manner, but even more to the remarkable economy of action which he learned from his theatrical experience. *The Golden Bowl* is the ultimate in economy, and the final justification of those years away from the novel. He apologizes in the preface for the relatively small number of characters, explaining that his purpose was "to play the small handful of values really for all they were worth." The book falls into two (this time equal) halves, and the whole story is reflected through the minds of the Prince and Maggie, with Mrs. Assingham as *ficelle* to keep them in touch with the other two main characters. He mentions the "marked inveteracy of a certain indirect and oblique view of my presented action; unless I call this mode of treatment . . . the very straightest and closest possible." For the drama of the mind, it is the very straightest and closest possible. The rise of the action to its climax is more sustained than in any of his other novels, for the suggestion of a catastrophe determined in spite of oppositions comes early, and only in the two beautifully staged scenes between Maggie and Charlotte, almost at the end, do we realize that Maggie's character presents an opposition more determined than the threatened catastrophe.

The entire action of *The Golden Bowl* is presented scenically, with interludes in which the protagonists meditate, and that is why it exemplifies James's economy despite the

number of pages: he does not merely narrate; he represents, a method which takes a great deal longer. The method is structurally less exacting than that of *The Awkward Age*, which has no meditations, or than that of *The Ambassadors*, which is limited to the action of one mind. By allowing himself the latitude of an insight into two minds, James has been able to present all his action dramatically and directly, without need of narrative, and without too great a burden of implication. The story as such is hardly a story at all, but what James makes of it in his own subtle yet concrete way! He avoids the obvious, the scene which must have occurred between the Prince and Charlotte on that one unaccounted-for day at Gloucester—"the day like a great gold cup that we must somehow drain together"—but so thoroughly gives us both anticipation and consequences¹² that we have no feeling of having been cheated, as we do in *The Wings of the Dove*. We are throughout in as direct contact with the action as if it were a play, except that an even more severe selection is made possible because the action is always represented through the intelligence of one of the participants. The objective visual method and the masterly indirect method are combined in the two climactic scenes, in which we are shown, with a distinctness unusual in the later James, the setting: in one case the peaceful, lighted living room, in the other the shady garden in the middle of a sultry afternoon. In the first, we share Maggie's consciousness of the power, almost the temptation, to shatter that peace:¹³ just as in the second we suffer with Charlotte's terrified pride.

Maggie is James's triumph of characterization. He is one of the few novelists or playwrights who have interestingly used naïve or innocent characters as the subjects of drama.

¹² As Mr. Pelham Edgar points out in *Henry James: Man and Author* (London, 1927), 332.

¹³ The treatment here foreshadows that of the famous scene in *Strange Interlude*. If James had not been ahead of his time, he might have been a good dramatist.

Early in the novel he asserts that a person's portrait is presented in the conversation of those who discuss him and grows under a multiplication of touches. In "The Prince," as the first half of the book is called, we hear from the author, from Charlotte, and from Mrs. Assingham, not only how innocent and good Maggie is, but how she is also in some way a force to be reckoned with. That this is true appears in the second half, "The Princess." When the Prince returns from his day with Charlotte, it is to find Maggie waiting for him in her grandest *parure* and so much in possession of herself that she does not even have to ask where he has been. By her superb control in asking no questions and in keeping what she suspects or knows to herself, she gets, psychologically, the upper hand, and keeps it until the time comes to resolve the situation with the sacrifice of her own pride. She tells Mrs. Assingham, "I can bear anything—for love." The drama has the beautiful inevitability of Greek tragedy—her character is her fate—only what gradually appears is not a tragic flaw but a vein of gold, and what is inevitable is the failure of the threatened tragedy to occur. The slow growth of her character, developing as it does through contact with life, is an artistic achievement far ahead of such a creature as Isabel Archer, who springs, so to speak, full-armed from her creator's head. No wonder he called *The Golden Bowl* "the most arduous and thankless task I ever set myself."

It is clear from this discussion that James's preoccupation with the theatre was in no sense a waste of effort, and that its results have not been properly appreciated by critics. I do not, of course, mean to imply that all the excellence of his great triad is due to the dramatic lustrum; but my conclusion is very definitely that those years taught him an ultimate formal perfection which would otherwise have been less complete, and gave him that control of his material and of his method which enabled him to produce three masterpieces in three successive years. He had laid down the canons of his craft twenty years before, but he needed the experience in

an allied form of expression in order to live up to them. For the "sawdust and orange-peel" of the theatre he was not meant; but the drama, through the practice of which he perfected the novel as "the most prodigious of literary forms," he has made, beautifully, his own.